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COMMITTEE ON CONFERENCES
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Agenda item 4 (a)*

CONTROL AND LIMITATION OF DOCUMENTATION

PROVISION OF WRITTEN MEETING RECORDS TO SUBSIDIARY BODIES
OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Note by the Secretariat

1. In paragraph 14 of its resolution 47/202 B, the General Assembly welcomed the decision of the Committee on Conferences to review the criteria for, status of and guidelines on the provision of written meeting records, and requested the Committee, taking into account the costs of conference-servicing, to report thereon to the General Assembly at its forty-eighth session with concrete recommendations. To assist it in its review, the Committee requested the Secretariat to examine and report on the criteria, status and guidelines that were the basis for prior recommendations to and of the General Assembly on the provision of written meeting records to its subsidiary bodies, and to include in its report an assessment of the current validity of the guidelines.

Criteria for the provision of meeting records

2. By its resolution 3415 (XXX) of 8 December 1975, the General Assembly adopted on an experimental basis a set of criteria for the provision of meeting records that can be summarized as follows:

(a) Meeting records shall be provided for the General Assembly and its Main Committees, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council and its sessional committees;

(b) Meeting records shall be provided for a limited number of selected subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly discussing matters of substantive importance, but only for meetings at which such items are dealt with. The

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bodies concerned shall be required to dispense with such records for organizational, procedural and valedictory discussions and for the adoption of their reports, and be urged to dispense with them for substantive discussions of lesser importance. The General Assembly, in the resolution establishing a subsidiary body, shall decide whether its proceedings are of sufficient substantive importance; in the absence of an express decision, records will not be provided;

(c) The list of subsidiary bodies provided with meeting records shall be reviewed to see if it includes bodies whose meetings do not appear to have an important substantive character or for which the cost of providing records appears to be out of proportion with the possible benefit;

(d) Verbatim records shall be provided for the Trusteeship Council and for substantive matters discussed in the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space and the Special Committee on the Situation with regard to the Implementation of the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples;

(e) The Secretariat shall issue the summary records of subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly in initial general distribution, subject to the issuance of corrigenda to remove serious errors only;

(f) Subsidiary bodies of subsidiary bodies shall not be provided with written meeting records;

(g) The other main organs shall be invited to observe the same criteria in deciding whether records should be provided for their subsidiary bodies;

(h) Summary records shall be provided for the Trade and Development Board and the Executive Board of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Governing Council of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

(i) Subsidiary bodies otherwise entitled to receive meeting records for all or some of their meetings shall be required to dispense with them when meeting away from recognized United Nations conference centres;

(j) In principle, summary records of the main organs shall be limited to 15 pages per meeting of 2½ to 3 hours, and efforts shall be made to reduce the summary records of subsidiary bodies to 10 pages per meeting of the same length.

3. In subsequent resolutions - 32/71 of 9 December 1977 and 33/56 of 14 December 1978 - the General Assembly modified somewhat the above criteria by urging bodies entitled to meeting records to dispense with them for particular discussions, whether of an informal nature or otherwise, when they are not absolutely necessary, and calling upon all United Nations bodies to review periodically, on the basis of statements of financial implications, the requirements for meeting records, to explore possibilities for reduced services with regard to records and to dispense, whenever possible, with meeting records.

4. The General Assembly returned to the criteria for the provision of written meeting records in 1982 when, in resolution 37/14 C of 16 November 1982, it decided that, for an experimental period of three years, no subsidiary organ of

the General Assembly should be entitled to summary records, with the exception of the seven organs listed in the resolution. The Assembly also decided that summary records should continue to be provided to regular and special sessions of governing bodies of certain United Nations organs and programmes and to pledging conferences or meetings of ad hoc bodies established for the announcement of voluntary contributions by States. In addition, the Assembly:

- (a) Reaffirmed that no United Nations body or organ should have both verbatim and summary records for the same meeting;
- (b) Decided that the exceptions granted to certain subsidiary organs would not apply to their subsidiary bodies;
- (c) Reaffirmed that any further exceptions would require the explicit approval of the General Assembly in a pertinent resolution or decision;
- (d) Requested all subsidiary organs entitled to written meeting records to keep their requirements for such records to a reasonable minimum, to dispense with them whenever possible, and to make wider use of sound recordings;
- (e) Confirmed that summary records should not be provided to special conferences and their preparatory organs, with the exception of legal codification conferences, for which the needs would be determined in each case;
- (f) Decided that subsidiary organs entitled to receive written meeting records should receive them when meeting away from recognized United Nations conference centres only if there was a specific decision of the General Assembly for each case;
- (g) Requested subsidiary organs receiving written meeting records to avoid including summaries of discussions in their reports, unless such summaries were indispensable, by referring instead to the relevant meeting records.

5. In its resolution 38/32 E of 25 November 1983, the General Assembly restricted the practice of reproducing statements in extenso for all its subsidiary organs entitled to summary records, and in resolution 40/243 of 18 December 1985 it decided that the experimental arrangements for summary records established in 1982 should remain in effect until it took further action. A year later, by resolution 41/177 D of 5 December 1986, the Assembly extended for a further three years the experimental arrangements established by resolution 37/14 C, with the exceptions thereto, invited governing bodies of United Nations organs and programmes to reconsider their need for summary records, decided that pledging conferences and meetings of ad hoc bodies established for the announcement of voluntary contributions should no longer receive summary records, and invited the Military Staff Committee to consider dispensing with verbatim records.

6. On 21 December 1990, by resolution 45/238 B of 21 December 1990, the General Assembly decided that, pending a further decision, no subsidiary organ of the Assembly should be entitled to summary records, with the exception of the following:

- (a) Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean;

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- (b) Committee on the Exercise of the Inalienable Rights of the Palestinian People;
- (c) International Law Commission;
- (d) Legal Subcommittee of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space;
- (e) Special Committee against Apartheid;
- (f) United Nations Commission on International Trade Law.

The Assembly further decided that summary records should continue to be provided to regular and special sessions of the following governing bodies: the Executive Board of UNICEF, the Executive Committee of the Programme of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the Governing Council of UNDP.

7. As can be seen from the above, although over the years the General Assembly has modified several times the pattern of entitlements to written meeting records, it has not reconsidered the criteria on which such entitlements are based.

8. As regards the General Assembly's request, repeated in several resolutions, that organs entitled to written records dispense with them whenever possible, only one of the subsidiary bodies listed in resolution 45/238 B, the United Nations Commission on International Trade Law, has consistently complied, reducing its requirements as requested. The Assembly's call for a periodic review by the organs concerned of their requirements for written records, on the basis of statements of financial implications, does not appear to have been generally heeded, at least formally.

Rationale for meeting records

9. As considered by the Committee on Conferences at its substantive meetings of May 1982, the rationale underlying the provision of written meeting records could be characterized as follows:

- (a) To enable delegations to have their positions on particular issues formally and authentically recorded in printed form in the working languages of the body concerned;
- (b) To provide an authoritative account of all proceedings and decisions of a meeting;
- (c) To facilitate future reference to discussions by providing authentic and officially issued texts;
- (d) To enable delegations to follow developments at meetings accurately and to facilitate the drafting of reports by both delegations and the Secretariat.

10. While in general written records currently continue to meet the purposes enumerated above, some developments may have had the effect of making them less

essential than they might have been in the past. Chief among these is the fact that taped sound recordings, which provide an incontestably accurate and reliable verbatim account of all proceedings, are available almost instantaneously, are easy to duplicate and are far less expensive to produce. With some obvious drawbacks, such as the requirement of play-back equipment and the time involved in listening to a three-hour recording as compared to reading a 15-page summary record, taped recordings could be said to address the needs mentioned above.

11. A second consideration is the extent to which delays in the issuance of meeting records, particularly summary records, have come to detract from their usefulness. Meeting records that are not issued until months after the organ concerned has closed its session, while still providing an authoritative account of the proceedings for archival or historical purposes, will hardly enable delegations to follow developments at meetings or facilitate reporting obligations. On the other hand, since the essence of a body's proceedings, and certainly all its decisions, are contained in its reports, meeting records may not be indispensable in this respect.

Cost

12. In resolutions 3415 (XXX) and 33/56 the General Assembly made cost a consideration in the provision of written meeting records. Accordingly, it may be relevant to quote here the notional cost of providing such records:

(a) Verbatim record in six languages	\$16 600
(b) Summary record in six languages	\$10 200

13. Since the obligation to produce General Assembly plenary and Security Council records requires the maintenance of a permanent Verbatim Reporting Section in any case, it could be argued that adding or subtracting entitlements to verbatim records does not have significant implications. Summary records, however, are drafted and translated in the Translation Services, which have to detach staff from the translation of pre- and in-session documents for this purpose. An additional cost of summary records, therefore, is that the time spent by translators attending meetings and drafting and translating records reduces the staff capacity available for translation, usually at times when the volume of documentation is highest.

Current situation

14. By and large, verbatim records are prepared and issued in all languages within reasonable deadlines. Only towards the end of peak periods, after the verbatim reporting capacity of the Secretariat has been exceeded for some time, do delays occur. But any backlogs that may accumulate are usually cleared up shortly after the closing of a session.

15. The timely production of summary records, on the other hand, has become increasingly difficult over the past few years. The sharp increase in translation workloads, which have grown by over 20 per cent since 1988, compounded by the 17 per cent reduction effected in the staff resources of the Translation Services over the same period, has cancelled out almost entirely the Secretariat's capacity to translate anything other than pre- and in-session

documents. As a result, while original language versions of summary records can still be produced in a timely manner, translation into the other languages required has to wait until the demand for parliamentary documents slackens enough to release some capacity in the relevant services or resources become available for contractual arrangements, which may not happen until well after a session has ended.

16. Unless there is a considerable drop in documentation requirements in the near future, a development that does not appear likely at this point, the timely provision of summary records in all languages to those organs that are currently entitled to them would necessitate the allocation of more appropriate resources to the Translation Services. One possible option, in the current critical situation, could be to give summary records the more informal status of conference room or working papers and issue them in the original language version only, making sure that they are drafted in an appropriate balance of languages. Another option could be to waive the simultaneous distribution requirement for summary records, allowing the original language version to be issued within 48 hours of the meeting while the others wait until translation capacity becomes available.

Conclusions

17. The basic criteria for the provision of written meeting records continue to be the substantive importance of the matters discussed by the body concerned, and the cost of providing such records in relation to the possible benefit. The General Assembly has consistently reserved to itself the authority to decide whether the proceedings of a subsidiary organ are of sufficient substantive importance to merit the provision of meeting records, although it has repeatedly encouraged bodies entitled to such records to dispense with them when discussing matters that are not substantive or are of lesser importance or when written records are not absolutely necessary.

18. Similarly, the General Assembly must decide whether the cost of providing written records to any organ appears to be out of proportion with the possible benefit; but it has also called upon all organs entitled to records to review their requirements periodically on the basis of statements of financial implications. The Secretariat's capacity to produce meeting records, the conditions in which records are being produced with the resources currently available, and the effects of such conditions on the benefits derived from the records, could be considerations in any review of the costs and benefits of the provision of meeting records.
